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ABSTRACT

As part of a larger study of systemic educational reform in rural Alaska, this case study focuses on the early implementation of the Alaska Onward to Excellence (AOTE) school improvement process in Aniak and Kalskag, two villages of Kuspuk School District in southwestern Alaska. District residents are primarily Yup'ik Eskimos, although the hub village of Aniak also has a large population of non-Natives and other Native groups. To examine contextual factors that help or hinder reform efforts, a community-based research team conducted interviews and focus groups with parents, teachers, administrators, students, and community members. AOTE and the community voice it tries to foster started out strong in both villages, but by the second year community turnout and school staff involvement were practically nonexistent. AOTE was unable to overcome historical conflicts related to the district's top-down management style and to past efforts to supplant Alaska Native cultural values with Western values and language. In addition, facilitators viewed the AOTE process itself as too complicated and cumbersome, while community members felt uninformed and uncertain of what was expected of them. In both villages, AOTE was viewed as "another district mandate," but did make an important contribution by increasing the level of community discussion. This report includes recommendations to outside reformers about addressing issues of local context, and details of secondary students' responses to the Quality of School Life Survey and during focus groups. (SV)

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ANIAK AND KALSKAG VILLAGES

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COMMUNITY VOICE AND EDUCATIONAL CHANGE: ANIAK AND KALSKAG VILLAGES

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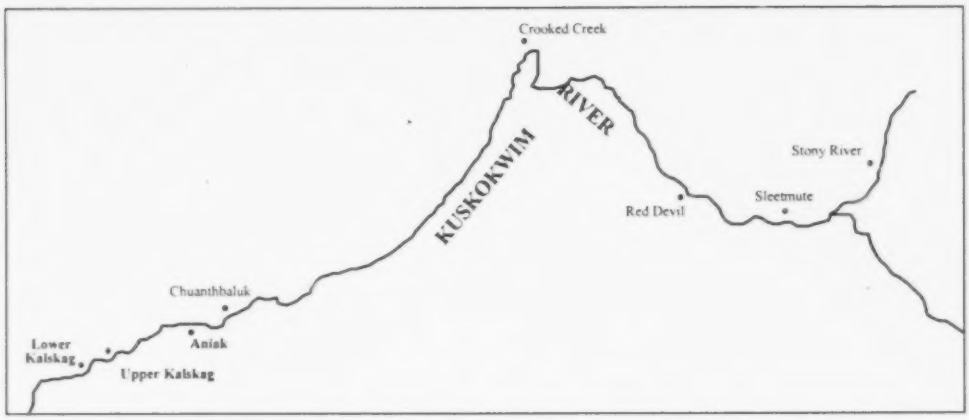
As you board the small twin-engine plane leaving Anchorage, a sense of adventure and newness immediately surrounds you. Along with 18 other passengers, the captain reads his required script informing you about possible emergency landings over water. Ironically, when traveling in the winter, there is no sign of water—only huge ice formations and snow-capped mountains and hills as far as the eye can see. The flight, lasting approximately 90 minutes, takes you 350 air miles west of Anchorage. Paved public transportation, and tall office buildings are left behind.

As you start to descend, the frozen Kuskokwim River that surrounds the 6,500 foot airstrip reveals travelers on snowmachines and 4-wheelers. The airstrip sits in the middle of the Aniak village, home of the Kuspuk School District. The school district area population is about 1,775 people. The majority of villages in the area, on average, are 90 to 98% Yup'ik Eskimo. Winters are long and cold, with temperatures frequently below -50° F. Although short, summers can have temperatures occasionally in the 90° F range.

The district covers over 12,000 square miles and includes eight villages accessible only by air and river travel. All the villages are located along the mid-Kuskokwim River from Lower Kalskag to Stony River, 120 air miles away (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.
Map of Kuspuk School District



The villages of Aniak and Kalskag (Figure 1, bold type) have been selected by the school district to participate in this case study research on educational reform and school change in remote Alaska schools. The district has engaged in a varied and ongoing effort to improve learning for students. All of these improvement efforts will be presented but with a special emphasis on a reform program started in October of 1996 called Alaska Onward to Excellence (AOTE). Although AOTE has been introduced in all village schools, this study will only focus on the two selected sites because of resource constraints. Moreover, because AOTE is in the early stages of implementation (less than six months of use when the study began), special emphasis will be placed on identifying contextual variables that help or hinder a program during early implementation.

Aniak Village

Aniak is on an island surrounded by the Kuskokwim River. Basic transportation consists mainly of small aircraft, trucks, all-terrain vehicles, boats in summer, and snowmachines in winter. You will not hear the howl of wolves, but sometimes you can hear the howl and barking of sled dogs. Many residents have dogs. Sled-dog teams are used for recreation and racing and as a reminder of older traditions. Recently, there has been an increase in professional guides offering rafting, fishing, and hunting trips in the area.

Walking down the road, you see prominent buildings, the local store, some housing, a small house that is now the city office, and a roadhouse called The Lodge. Adjacent to The Lodge is the old, sagging Kuskokwim Mission Church, now replaced by a new wood-frame building next door. About sixty steps away is the elementary school gym. This yellow metal-covered building serves as indoor playground, roller-skating facility, and meeting place for most of the elementary-age youth. The building is also used often by the community. Connected to the gym is the newly expanded Auntie Mary Nicoli Elementary school.

What was once a little schoolhouse is now a complex that serves about 100 children in grades K–5. Auntie Mary Nicoli used to serve children in grades K–12 before the introduction of a high school in 1984 and a middle school that opened in the fall of 1995 in an existing building. Both buildings are situated together about two miles across town. Aniak Secondary School serves about 45 students in grades 9–12 and the new middle school serves about 30 students in grades 6–8. There is a community hall that houses many social and political functions. However, along with the post office, stores, airline offices, and churches, most interaction occurs at the school sites. Aniak is also the administrative center for the Kuspuk School District.

Local residents choose Aniak because it is an inclusive place to live. Its population base is made up of Alaska Native and non-Native people. The Native culture is primarily Yup'ik Eskimo, but there are some residents who have kinship ties to other Alaska Indian groups. Many of the children belong to blended families, where they grow up in two cultures. As a matter of fact, the high-schoolers proudly wear the name "Aniak Halfbreeds" as their mascot.

While Aniak is considered "the big city" by residents of surrounding villages, its almost 600 people know that the big city remains far away in places like Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau. Aniak now has cable TV, an airstrip long enough for small jets, some apartment houses, and several businesses. Native and regional organizations also reside here, including the Kuskowim Native Corporation, regional health services, fish and game, and the state troopers' office. These all give the illusion of a larger place. Aside from these amenities and conveniences, Aniak is still a small, remote rural village. Its role as a "hub" village masks its delicate economic stability.

Commercial fishing and trapping used to provide significant and reliable income to those involved in this work. Economic factors associated with changing market demands have reduced this reliable source of income to the point of unprofitability. The city and local governing groups are looking at ways to address work and income opportunities while preserving Aniak's quality of life. Because of the number of regional organizations and services, Aniak has an unemployment rate of 9.7 percent, low for most Alaska villages.

Kalskag Village

The village of Kalskag is located about 30 air miles down the Kuskowim River from the town of Aniak, the commercial center for the region. In winter, most travel to Kalskag is done by airplane, although all-terrain vehicles, snowmachines, and trucks move along the river when it is fully frozen. Kalskag is really two different Yup'ik villages that were created in the 1940s when Catholic practitioners relocated to what is now called Upper Kalskag, and Russian Orthodox practitioners relocated two miles down river to what is now called Lower Kalskag. Upper and Lower Kalskag have populations of 184 and 392, respectively.

Each village has its own post office and local governing bodies. At one time, each village had its own K–6 elementary school, but a reorganization took place in the 1970s. As a result, two new elementary organizational plans were implemented: Zackar Levi School serves 70 to 80 students in grades K–4 and is located in Lower Kalskag. Joseph and Olinga Gregory School serves 33 students in grades 5–6 and is located in Upper Kalskag. After a fire destroyed the old high school, George Morgan Senior High School was built on the same site, which is located between the two villages along a stretch of gravel road with few other buildings or other signs of town living. The George Morgan Senior High School serves students in grades 7–12.

To gain a sense of the village, one needs to remember that everything must be shipped in by boat or plane, depending on the season. The community is a combination of prefabricated homes shipped by barge up the Kuskowim River and log cabins. Electricity is generated by diesel-fired motors in the center of the village, which run continuously. My first impression gave me a feeling that life here is different from other

places. The typical signs and electric displays that indicate local businesses and agencies were subdued or nonexistent. Everyone knows where they are. Although the village gives the impression of a place in transition, I learned that most residents have lived in the area with their extended families for many decades. The population has not only been stable but has been growing in recent years.

Upper and Lower Kalskag share many of the same economic and social concerns of other rural Alaska village schools. Over 70% of village livelihood comes from subsistence activities such as fishing, trapping, and hunting. Cash income is derived from public employment at the school, city, or clinic and from public assistance programs. Some commercial fishing and fire fighting provide seasonal income. Unemployment runs between 25 and 37%.

Collecting Information from the Field

To better understand how educational improvement and reform efforts have been implemented and sustained in the communities of Aniak and Kalskag, information was collected from a variety of sources (Table 1). By using variety of information sources such as interviews, survey, and document analysis, findings could be cross validated. For example, interviews were conducted with senior and retiring teachers and compared with interviews conducted with junior and first-year teachers. In a similar manner, student survey data was collected and compared with adult perceptions of schooling. Moreover, multiple data sets helped to deepen understanding and create a rich picture of efforts to improve and reform student learning.

Table 1
Data Sources and Collection Strategies

	Data Collection Strategies			
Data Sources	**Survey Instruments**	**Interviews**	**Observation**	**Documents**
Students	*Quality of School Life*	Senior focus group	Informal	Yes
Community & Parents	*Parent Involvement: What Do Parents Think?*	Structured and informal	Informal	Yes
District Office	None	Structured and informal	Informal	Yes
Teaching staff: Senior and junior staff	*Parent Involvement: What Do Teachers Think?*	Structured and informal	Informal	Yes
Building Principals	None	Structured and informal	Informal	Yes
AOTE Trainers and Facilitators	Yes, as part of teaching staff	Yes	Informal	Yes

In order to improve the quality of interview data and to enhance their validity and reliability, interviews were tape recorded wherever possible and later transcribed for analysis. Where tape recording was not a viable option, handwritten notes were taken. In addition, demographic data such as district size, school configurations, poverty rates, etc. were collected, along with written documents such as grants, meeting notes from parent groups, advisory meeting notes, school board minutes, and minutes from improvement teams. Visits were conducted to each of the schools where informal observations were made and discussion held with various staff and students. Lastly, a key strategy that helped guide and inform data collection and analysis was the use of a community-based research team. The five-member team was chosen by the school district administration. Two team members were chosen to represent each village and one team member represented the district administration. Project staff provided ongoing training in a collaborative setting with research teams from each of the case-study sites.

Early Direction Setting

A first phase of the research began with a training session where all of the site-based research teams convened. During this session, potential data sources and information

leads were identified through an activity where each research team created a map showing history of educational reform in each of their respective villages. Each map grew from a core question focusing on educational reform: "What efforts and changes have occurred to improve experiences and learning of students in your village?" Table 2 provides a narrative overview of the concepts and ideas presented in Kalskag and Aniak. An analysis of their reform map revealed a complex but preliminary picture of key themes around which efforts have been made to improve student learning (Table 2).

A second phase of the research involved a site visit where representatives from both villages, including parents, school and district staff, and school board members, were interviewed. Because of a high number of early retirements in Aniak and Kalskag, efforts were made to interview retiring teachers. Many of these teachers had been with the school district for over 14 years and provided a unique historical perspective on change in the school district. After this preliminary site visit, interview questions were reviewed with the research team and then put in final form for use in follow-up site visits (see Table 3).

In addition, senior research staff met to review and discuss research progress across all sites. It became clear from this early work that two dimensions of educational reform in Alaska villages should be explored in depth and serve to help guide and frame inquiry. These have been stated as questions: (a) What role should community voice play in educational decision making? and (b) What kinds of learning opportunities and experiences appear to best serve the needs of village students? The first area centers around the type of relationships established between the school and the community that support or constrain improved learning and experiences for students. The second area seeks to understand what types of learning opportunities and experiences appear most successful in village schools.

Table 2.
Research Team Reform Concepts

Concepts	Description/Issues Surfaced	Results/Examples
Local control	Molly Hootch Case (1974) forced state to provide education to all rural villages	• boarding schools closed, requiring the state to create the capacity in rural areas to offer K–12 education
Village education implemented	Rural Education Attendance Areas (REAA's) created as vehicle for local education	• local high schools opened • local school boards empowered • youth stay in their villages • parent/community participation mandated
Community involvement	Community involvement is an ever-present need and problem because of numerous factors such as a) a history of outside control of schools, b) most schools are staffed by non-Native people, and c) cultural discontinuity	• Parent Advisory Committees (PACs) required • District Advisory Council established in 1990s • AOTE implemented in 1996–97 • Elder's Conference (district-wide) • elder's lunch program (district-wide) • Kalskag celebrates a cultural heritage week
Wellness	Cultural discontinuity, unemployment, and other factors create health problems	• 1992 fetal alcohol syndrome mandate • suicide prevention • teen pregnancy and the need for sex education • drug/alcohol counseling and prevention programs
State funding levels	Large oil boom of the late 1970s supported REAA and program growth, but downturn in late 1980s has created problems	• need to scale back programs such as field trips, curriculum, and staff development
Early retirement	Large number of Alaska educators are close to retirement age. New state early retirement law has created a large turnover in staff	• many new teachers will be hired • new ideas and energy to school • how to get quality teachers, train them, and help them to adjust to village life
Curriculum	Rapid expansion of curriculum with REAA and oil money. Downturn in economics and teacher retirement creates hardships	• kindergarten roundup • distance education and computers • local curriculum reflecting Yup'ik heritage • community involvement required
Students	Changing conditions of village life and the outside world impacting on student attitudes and behavior	• students are more demanding and seem more confident • seems to be a lack of respect • many students up late watching videos
Preschool	Programs provide early intervention and preparation for entering school	• elder school program offered • program funded by Native Association • Association of Village Council Residents Head Start program
School to work	Changing conditions—welfare reform and federal funding—require a rethinking of schooling towards job skills	• partnerships formed to give student school to work experiences: Calista, Placerdome Mining Co.

Table 3
Case Study Interview Questions (First Visit)

1. *What do you like about living in the area?*
2. *Tell me about the relationship between the community and schools in Aniak/Kalskag. Think back over the last five to ten years.*
3. *When you think back and reflect over the history of the school district, tell me about efforts to improve student experiences and learning in Aniak/Kalskag?*
4. *What role has the local Native culture played in schooling in Aniak over the last five to ten years? (Go back further if you like.)*
5. *What do you see as the purpose or mission of the school district?*
6. *Describe any goals the Aniak/Kalskag Schools have worked on.*
7. *Is there other related information you would like to share?*

History, Community Voice, and Alaska Onward to Excellence

Involving the community in schools and their children's education was described by many of those interviewed as historically problematic. Some contrasting comments from parents, community members, and teachers will help reveal the depth and complexity of the community's relationship and involvement with schools in Aniak and Kalskag villages.

A 14-year veteran teacher from Aniak said during an interview, "as far as I can remember there have always been difficulties trying to involve the community in the schools." Another Aniak teacher with less experience observed, "it seems to me that people bend over backwards trying to get the community involved, trying to appease and accommodate things. So I think we are dealing with deep issues. I think they are very deep and may go back to childhood." A parent from Kalskag helps shed light on what these deep issues may be as he contrasts the values of his parent's child-rearing practices with his experiences in school as a boy:

> Those were pretty rough years; teachers were very very strict. Either speak English or get out of school or get the spanking of your life, and I

> got spanked and my parents never did that to me. They never spanked me, they would tell me verbally, they would scold me verbally but they never laid a hand on me. The only ones that laid a stick on me was my teachers or the school. Yeah, when I was 8 years old I was in the first grade. I used to run away a lot.

He went on to say that the teachers have tried to keep him informed of how his children are doing with notes and phone calls. He feels school is much better these days because his children's teachers convey a sense of care.

A first-year Kalskag teacher struggling to make a positive difference in his classroom reflects on similar issues when he says,

> Education is something that has been kind of thrust on to the people in this area, and I don't know whether to ask if they really wanted it or not. I don't think it really matters at this point. The upshot from what I have seen is a clash of different values. People who come here to teach value education highly, and most of the people here don't value formal education and learning highly.

A teacher from Aniak who was leaving the district illustrates this clash in values from a less sympathetic perspective when he was asked to reflect on using community members as resources for students: "I don't want a parent or community member teaching my kids, at least not this community." By contrast, efforts initiated in Kalskag have demonstrated that teachers and community members can find common ground in sharing their knowledge and learning with youth through such activities as Spirit Week.

Nearly everyone interviewed acknowledged the need to improve relations between school and community, especially in terms of greater involvement of parents in their children's education.

These contrasting perspectives help present a pattern of responses learned from interviewing well over 40 people from both villages—that community-school relations and involving the community in school activities have always been difficult. Even with many improved learning opportunities for students, there is evidence that leadership within the schools and the district have constrained community involvement through policy and behavior, although maybe not with a malicious or premeditated intent. According to two veteran teachers,

> The history of the district has been one of centralized decisions. The previous superintendent was here for 15 years and controlled everything. He ruled absolutely and we haven't broken that. Some of those who worked with him are still in power on the board. Old habits have changed very slowly. The community does not know how to make decisions. The only effort to deal with this history has been AOTE, and this has only been words so far.

In an effort to alter this historical pattern, the current superintendent sought the implementation of Alaska Onward to Excellent (AOTE) because of evidence coming from other Alaska districts that the model would provide a structure for meaningful involvement and community-level decision making:

> We've been looking at AOTE for a couple of years. I really like the model. I think it's time for people to step up to their level of involvement in activity at the community level. I think this is a way that can happen. It's really difficult to get people to step into those kind of roles [decision making] if there is not a structure for them to do so, and AOTE provides a structure for that to happen. People can't assume roles that they don't have a model for. I see AOTE as a really exciting way to get more people involved, get more voices in the circle.

At this same time, money was available through the Alaska Comprehensive Regional Assistance Center to fund a large portion of the training and implementation work at the district level. As a result, the superintendent in consultation with administrative staff and the school board decided to implement AOTE district wide.

AOTE

AOTE seeks to bring the community into partnership with the school through a series of activities designed to nurture local ownership in improvement work. A key strategy for developing ownership focuses on using local community members and school staff to serve as facilitators. Both Aniak and Kalskag have two village facilitators who are trained in group process skills and AOTE implementation strategies. They are trained to instruct a local leadership team in each village to conduct all village meetings. Moreover, there is a district leadership team that overseas the AOTE process district-wide and a district research team that monitors the process, providing feedback for ongoing

improvements. An initial orientation meeting was held with the district advisory council where AOTE was described and dates set for the first village meetings.

AOTE in Aniak Village

The first AOTE community gathering was held in October of 1996. Two students and 20 adults participated, of which six were community members not working in the schools. Working in teams, they identified: (a) what values and beliefs from the past they wanted to keep for the future, and (b) what important values and beliefs they have for their children and learning. A district summary by the leadership team indicated that responses clustered together into three groups: cultural heritage and traditions, ethical and personal values, and educational values.

The second and third meetings were combined and held in November, and 28 people attended. During this combined meeting, participants developed a set of outcomes desired for graduating seniors and evaluated the district's mission statement.

The fourth and fifth community meetings were held in February and May. At meeting four, people worked together to select a community goal for improving student learning. They chose to focus on student interpersonal skills:

> Students should have good interpersonal skills, including respect, responsibility, dependability, compassion, patience, perseverance, honesty, self motivation, independence, hard working, willing to take responsibility for actions, and be a positive role model.

In May, meeting five was held to identify sources of data that would help measure growth in the goal area. However, only six people attended. In part this may be due to the high level of community activity that occurs this time of year with the break-up of ice on the river. The two village facilitators adjourned the meeting early because "there weren't enough people present to do our activity for the evening." The facilitators decided that rather than attempt to reschedule the meeting, letters would be written to local newspapers and organizations advising them of the meeting and the goal they would

work on in the fall. They would also ask people to think about the goal over the summer and be prepared to work together in the fall.

Local facilitators trained to implement AOTE said they believed in the program but it was extremely difficult to get the community involved. Reflecting on the low turnout, one facilitator said,

> I have been feeling very frustrated because we haven't been getting that many community people to the meetings. It's just because people have a lot of other things to do. Another thing, which we have expressed before, is we've been having our meetings at the school and I think that kind of keeps people away. Being from the community and hearing their bad experience with the teachers and not wanting to come back and have that bad experience happen again. There are a lot of parents who have come to the school and just felt uncomfortable. If we had meetings elsewhere, I think we would get more participants. But then, elsewhere we have to pay for the building and stuff like that.

By year two of implementation, the level of community turnout and school staff involvement appeared to be nearly nonexistent. According to one observer who has participated in all the meetings, "I've seen AOTE now for one year and we are in year two. I think it's falling apart. We've got two villages that have no facilitators; no one wants to do anything. Even in Aniak and Kalskag where they are still going through it, it's like, 'gosh darn, we have to do this.' "

The district AOTE facilitator met with the village facilitators to discuss meetings five and six, which were supposed to happen during the second year of implementation. However, these meetings did not occur.

AOTE in Kalskag Village

The first AOTE village meeting in Kalskag was held in October of 1996. Twenty-two students and 42 adults participated. Working in teams, they identified what they wanted to sustain for the future. They also described their hopes for children and learning. According to a local teacher, the meeting was very positive, "one of the few meetings where that many people have come together to share their views about the community and children." However, subsequent meetings were less well attended. The

second and third meetings were combined and held in November and then repeated in December because of low turnout (27 people in November and 36 in December).

During the December meeting, participants developed a set of outcomes desired for graduating seniors and evaluated the district's mission statement. Village meeting four was held in February and focused on selecting a community goal for student learning that would be implemented by the community. Initially the village chose a goal that focused on addressing alcohol and drug abuse in the community and its negative impact on student learning. But somehow, the local leadership team had the impression they had not followed AOTE guidelines, which emphasized that a goal needs to address some aspect of student performance and be measurable. As a result, the village leadership team changed to a goal focusing on developing student interpersonal skills. This meeting was attended by 43 people: 15 adults and 28 students.

An observer new to the village felt that the flip-flopping about the goal had a damaging effect on the process and helps highlight the need for simplicity and early results if an educational reform processes like AOTE is to work in remote village communities like Kalskag:

> I don't know what happened. Somehow we misunderstood or it wasn't conveyed clearly or some combination that the goals were supposed to be measurable student goals and what people got excited about originally was helping clean up drug and alcohol problems. When we thought we couldn't do that, it totally deflated any excitement about this. So then we went back to the leadership team and they said, 'yeah, let's work on that goal.' So that's where we are. So it's been a whole year of umpteen, zillion meetings and coming up with one goal.

Nonetheless, when the original goal to focus on creating a healthy, drug and alcohol free environment was selected, efforts were made to move forward in implementing this goal. Interestingly, these efforts appear much less formalized than normally associated with the AOTE planning process. Moreover, they seem to be rather serendipitous. For example, the village principal assumed the responsibility to put together a panel to present information at an assembly for students on drugs and alcohol. Because of village isolation, costs, and other constraints, the principal could not find a speaker. As a result, she said, "I began calling local people to serve on a panel, and the numbers grew to 12 people."

Panelists represented village members who had personally struggled with drugs and/or alcohol. They described how their experiences had hurt them and their families. According to the principal and village parents who were interviewed, the panel presentation was so powerful that "you could hear a pin drop" during the assembly. Clearly, local folks speaking from heart-felt experiences had a greater impact on students than an outsider talking from a more clinical perspective. Because of the success of the first assembly, a second presentation with different people was held four months later, with plans being developed for a third presentation using students.

Using panels made up of local villagers does not appear on any formal AOTE plan, yet it reflects the strategic intent of the village and school to address a significant need identified by the community. It also demonstrates that some action is taking place besides meetings. The contribution AOTE appears to have made is a level of consensus about a problem needing to be addressed. Interviews suggest there may be a better, more efficient process for arriving at the goal–one that does not dampen interest and enthusiasm by a long, complex timeframe.

Meetings five and six did not happen, at least not in the manner prescribed by AOTE. The panel presentations appear to have been viewed by village facilitators as more beneficial substitutes.

Where to Now, AOTE?

Data collected by the AOTE evaluation team at the end of village meetings identified "more parent and community involvement" as the most pressing concern facing AOTE. This was true across the district. Participants felt that without parent interest and their active participation, AOTE will die out. Local facilitators trained to implement AOTE said they saw a need for the program and held high hopes for success, but indicated it was extremely difficult to get the community involved. A district facilitator responsible for tracking district-wide implementation held similar feelings:

> I see with AOTE that we're not getting people involved. In most cases, the first meetings were really well attended. But the process isn't really user friendly. I mean, sitting in meetings and going through this stuff, you don't have a good feeling where it's all going or what's happening, and

you've got all this gobble-dee-gook, so we've seen a real decrease in the amount of community involvement.

In April of 1998, a facilitators meeting was held with AOTE trainers and a timeline was established for moving the process forward. The district superintendent, AOTE district facilitator, AOTE trainers, school principals, and various staff attended. The goal of the session was the development of a district AOTE plan of action (Table 4). Six action steps were identified. Some progress has been made in achieving the tasks. The most notable progress has been community asset training for the village of Kalskag to help them identify resources for achieving their goal. However, the celebration of AOTE accomplishments did not happen. According to the AOTE district facilitator, there was little reason to celebrate "because little had been accomplished with AOTE."

Table 4
Kuspuk School District AOTE Plan of Action

	What	When	Person Responsible	Status
1.	PAC elections	Spring 1998	superintendent, principals	some completed
2.	Celebrations	April–May	AOTE facilitator	did not happen
3.	Assets training in Kalskag	August 19–21	superintendent, assistant superintendent	completed
4.	PAC training on integrating AOTE	September	superintendent	unknown
5.	Review assets survey	November	superintendent team	too early
6.	Set priorities and develop compacts	Unknown	superintendent team	unknown

Nonetheless, the plan suggests a district-level intention to move forward with AOTE. In part, this may have been an artifact of the training session having been sponsored and well attended by supervisory AOTE sponsors and trainers (four in attendance). In other words, evidence from the two villages would suggest that left on their own, AOTE would either disappear or be adapted into something quite different. Would this also be the case at the district level if left on their own without external motivation from the AOTE sponsors and trainers?

Other than the district-wide advisory committee structure to facilitate community and staff involvement in district decisions, AOTE appears be the first systemic effort to actively engage the community and give them a voice in school improvement. The district has consistently followed state guidelines that require student and parent surveys be used in helping to assess program success and needs. The district also engages in various forms of goal setting that require sampling opinions from the community. But many of these efforts happen in a piecemeal fashion within various mandates and grant requirements. Clearly a need existed for some process that would bring together the diverse constituent groups of the school district to help decide what educational reforms and changes would best serve village youth.

The current superintendent and district staff have made efforts to moderate this highly centralized management style, which appears to be a pervasive source of poor relations throughout the district. AOTE, the activation of the district-wide advisory council, and the development of a well-articulated staff hiring policy illustrate some of these efforts. But painful histories die hard. Every educator interviewed, even administrative staff, said that relationships between the school and community have always been strained, as well as relations between the teachers and the administration.

The current superintendent has a long history in the district. She has taught in the school district since 1975. As a teacher, she was chief negotiator for the teacher's union and experienced a high degree of conflict and tension during the 1970s and 1980s. She earned her administrative endorsement while in the district and was hired first as a curriculum coordinator and then as a principal for Aniak. She was later hired as the superintendent. But this rise from teacher to superintendent has not been without challenges. Relationships at this time were at an all-time low. According to the superintendent:

> The relationship between the community and the school and the teaching staff and the administration was just hellacious. . . . It was really a very very difficult situation and the community was very involved in it, as were the students, so it was not a good situation at all.

Her image of village schooling has been strongly influenced by these experiences. Moreover, the community's views of schooling have also, in part, been influenced and shaped by this history, which may explain the reluctance to become involved with the schools.

The superintendent and the school board have made efforts to improve relations such as offering an incentive for early retirement to a large percentage of long-term staff in the hopes of building new, more positive relations within the district (nearly 30% have taken early retirement). Another effort has been the introduction of a collaborative teacher contract negotiation process instead of contracting a professional negotiator, which had been the practice of the previous superintendent and a major contributing source of strained relations. A long-time district employee described these changes as improving relations in the district and in the communities: "Negotiations were a hostile activity. And she brought in Roxie and did collaborative bargaining and I think that that really alleviated a lot of that tension."

Further, the decision to try AOTE can be linked to these historical circumstances as a process to help transform the past. So, how has AOTE helped transform relations? Has it increased community voice in their children's schooling? And how has it contributed to improving learning opportunities and experiences for students?

The current level of AOTE activity appears minimal. Only Kalskag seems to be actively pursuing their goal with any semblance of the AOTE process, but even here, AOTE has given way to adaptations that better fit the local context. And because the process is still in the early stages of implementation, it is difficult to assess whether it has had any positive impact on students. But given the evidence so far, the prognosis does not look good that changes in student learning and experiences will happen because of AOTE.

Nearly everyone interviewed, from administrators to teachers to community members, identified a clear need for improving relations throughout the school district. With such a high level of agreed-upon need, it seems perplexing why more progress had not been made with AOTE. Several observations made by those interviewed shed some light on possible reasons for the limited success. These observations have been presented in Table 5.

Table 5
Reasons Identified as Limiting the Success of AOTE

	Reason	Observation	Data Source
1.	Viewed as another district mandate	I think it's viewed [AOTE] as "just another one of these things." Years back we had the DISTAR program, and then we had the Writing to Read program, and then we did the Battle of the Books, and then we did the Accelerated Reader. . . . It [AOTE] seems pretty programmatic. It's another program . . . another thing we are doing because we have to.	AOTE facilitator
2.	Training of trainers model not powerful enough to engage the local leadership teams	It has been hard to go from the two facilitators who get trained to them training the village leadership team. They're barely knowing what is supposed to be done and then they have to go back and train their peers.	AOTE facilitator
3.	Failed to involve key community networks early on in the process	I think one way we missed the boat is that we initially left out the local Parent Advisory Committees.	AOTE facilitator
4.	Too complex for size and makeup of the villages	There is an enormous amount of request being made as far as research for this or information for that, that when you have this size of community we end up burning people out. You can only go to so many meetings a week or miss so much time from work in order to attend.	school administrator
5.	Limited front end preparation and awareness development	I'm not sure what AOTE is accomplishing or what it is for. Who pays for it? How were districts selected? If you ask a villager what it is, they wouldn't know.	parent
6.	Negative influence of the past	I heard some sabotage that the school district wasn't going to support any changes. The school board was going to work on the goals that they wanted here at Kalskag, not what we wanted.	teacher
7.	Logistical issues relating to scheduling and time	There is a good reason why people are not showing up. People care and are interested, but they need time, they need to have an idea of what's the purpose for coming together, they need babysitting.	teacher
8.	Poor community participation	You may have one or two parents at a meeting. During the first meeting there were maybe eight and then it kind of just dwindled down from there.	community
9.	Too programmatic	It's scripted, it's canned, it doesn't feel to me like it's community-based, community-directed. It feels like its top down directed.	teacher
10.	Not sufficient expertise to solve community needs	I'm not sure if the school is the agency that should be changing the village. I personally don't feel qualified to be doing this. I try to focus my energies on children.	teacher

As can be seen, some of the reasons listed appear directly related to the AOTE process itself, such as training (item 2) and its complexity and structure (items 4 and 8). But many reasons relate to contextual issues such as local history and relationships (item 6), logistics (item 7), and ownership (items 1, 3, 9, and 10). In some ways, the number of locally related reasons suggests that the district may not have been ready for a systemic reform process such as AOTE. But it also suggests that the process may be overly complex for villages such as Aniak and Kalskag.

The State of Things: Local Capacity and Systemic Reform

In an effort to deepen understanding of the conditions that support and constrain the implementation of systemic reforms, information was collected from students, parents, and teachers using survey instruments collaboratively developed with the research team. In addition, focus group information was collected from seniors in Aniak and Kalskag villages regarding their views of learning and their aspirations for the future.

School-Community Relations

Given the difficulty school personnel say they have faced in trying to involve parents and the community in the schools, one cannot help wondering about the degree to which parents and the community really want to be involved. To help address this issue, a parent and teacher survey was constructed. A format employing parallel questions for parents and teachers was used. For example, the first question asked parents to rate numerous parent involvement strategies in terms of how important they were to them personally. Teachers were asked to rate the same items in terms of supporting their work with children (see Appendix A for a complete copy of the survey). Surveys were mailed out to each parent and a follow up reminder was sent several days after the survey due date. Teacher surveys were mailed to the school principal with recommendations for administering the survey. Self addressed, stamped return envelopes were included with both sets of surveys. Table 9 presents key findings for both parents and teachers.

Return rates for parents were quite low (15%). On the other hand, teachers in Kalskag had a return rate of 62%. However, no surveys were returned by Aniak teachers. This seems surprising given the simplicity of survey administration and completion. On average, it would take 15 minutes to complete a survey and teachers were given the option of returning their individual surveys or returning them as a group in a self-addressed, postage-paid mailer.

The low level of parent returns is consistent with findings from the interview data and levels of participation during AOTE meetings. Moreover, these low levels may also suggest something about the kind of involvement parents in small communities will likely respond to. Namely, the more personal the contact, the more likely the response. In other words, face-to-face positive interaction is more likely to produce high levels of engagement than more impersonal approaches such as surveys, large meetings, or phone calls. Interestingly, of the 43 people who participated in face-to-face interviews, only one voiced any kind of reservation about talking. More will be presented regarding this notion in a later section on what strategies appear to be effective.

Although return rates were quite low, the information sheds some light on how parents and community members would like to be involved as well as reasons why they may appear uninterested or reluctant to being involved.

Both parents and teachers across both Aniak and Kalskag identified and highly rated the same three ways parents could be involved with their children's education: encourage and support reading, help with homework, and attend conferences with teachers. Similar patterns were found for questions 1, 4, 5, and 6. Moreover, both teachers and parents felt it was important to share information on student progress on a regular basis through reports and direct contact (question 2). Parents seem to be sending a clear message that they want to be involved, but prefer a more personal approach such as "individual calls from teachers," "hear more from teachers," "invite parents," etc. But they also want to have direct contact with their children in the school through "parent reading to class," "having lunch with child," and "spend time helping in my child's classroom." Several questions appear to shed some light on why parents and community are perceived as uninvolved and apathetic.

Table 9
Kalskag and Aniak Responses on Selected Parent Involvement Survey Items

Selected Questions	Aniak Parent Responses (N=14)	Aniak Teacher Responses (N=0)	Kalskag Parent Responses (N=12)	Kalskag Teacher Responses (N=10)
Question #1: Rate various ways parents can be involved in their child's education on a three-point scale, where three is the most important (three top priorities shown)	• Read to my child or encourage him/her to read ($\overline{X}$ = 2.92) • Work with my child at home on homework or school-related projects ($\overline{X}$ = 2.85) • Attend teacher/parent conferences ($\overline{X}$ = 2.69)	None completed	• Read to my child or encourage him/her to read ($\overline{X}$ =3.00) • Attend teacher/parent conferences ($\overline{X}$ =2.92) • Work with my child at home on homework or school-related projects ($\overline{X}$ =2.83)	• Parents work with their child at home on homework or school-related projects ($\overline{X}$ =2.80) • Parents read to their child or encourage him/her to read ($\overline{X}$ =2.80) • Parents attend teacher/ parent conferences ($\overline{X}$ =2.70)
Question #2: List areas where you would like to see more parental involvement. (principal themes shown)	• Personal invitations from teachers to be involved in school and classroom activities • Curriculum planning and, in general, community input	None completed	• Talk and problem solve together around student needs • Be involved in decision-making and school activities • Direct involvement with student learning in and out of school	• Parents providing a learning environment at home through direct help and support • Provide parent training to support learning at home
Question #4: Select factors that constrain parental involvement. (principal themes shown)	• Discomfort in relating with teachers and the school system • Scheduling conflicts and child care	None completed	• Discomfort in relating with teachers and the school system • Scheduling conflicts and child care	• Discomfort in relating with teachers and the school system • Scheduling conflicts and child care

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Table 9 continued

Question #5: Rate various ways information can be shared with parents on a three-point scale, where three is the most important. (three top priorities shown)	• Contact me if my child is having problems ($\overline{X}$ = 3.00) • Interim or midterm reports about my child's grades ($\overline{X}$ = 2.92) • Newsletters for parents (from principal or teachers) ($\overline{X}$ = 2.67) • Contact me if my child does something well or improves ($\overline{X}$ = 2.67)	None completed	• Contact me if my child is having problems ($\overline{X}$ = 3.00) • Interim or midterm reports about my child's grades ($\overline{X}$ = 2.92) • Contact me if my child does something well or improves ($\overline{X}$ = 2.92)	• Contacts parent if student is having problems ($\overline{X}$ = 2.90) • Contacts parent if student does something well or improves ($\overline{X}$ = 2.80) • Interim or midterm reports about your student's grades ($\overline{X}$ = 2.70)
Question #6: List activities the schools and teachers could do to encourage parent involvement. (principal themes shown)	• Build personal relations through invitation, phone contact, saying hello, being friendly, home visits, etc.	None completed	• Build trust and positive relations with parents through direct involvement and showing care for children (e.g., luncheons, discussions, inviting elders, sharing positive student work, etc.)	• Help build student discipline program and help support it. • Build positive relations with the community through meeting parents, visiting in village, phone calls, etc.

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Responses to question 6 suggest for all groups the need for parent involvement based on personal contact and invitation from teachers. There was also an indication that parents are more likely to become involved with schools when there is demonstrated care for children by teachers. Kalskag teachers stressed the need for parents helping build and support a student discipline program. They also voiced concern about parent lack of interest in school their because of limited skills in helping their children with academics.

Both parents and teachers believe parents feel constrained from getting involved because of a discomfort with the school system and because of scheduling and child care constraints. Parents would like to be more involved with problem-solving with teachers around student needs and more involved in school-related decision making. But the evidence suggests that the form this involvement takes should be more informal and interpersonal rather than through formal processes and meetings such as the Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) or AOTE. Interestingly, teachers envisioned a much different role for parents: to see them involved more in their children's learning at home.

Involving Parents and Community: What Seems to Work

Some teachers manage to build sustained positive relations with parents. What emerged from interviews with parents and teachers were examples of behaviors that invite and encourage relationship building. For example, during an informal observation in Kalskag, a teacher had nearly every parent in her classroom decorating student desks for Halloween. Moms, dads, grandparents, and other family members gathered around their student's desk with scissors, colored paper, and markers, cutting and assembling a surprise Halloween decoration. Ironically, this observation came after a series of interviews in Aniak decrying the poor involvement of the community in the schools.

What makes this Halloween activity different than many others advocated by educators such as reading to your child, monitoring homework, etc. is the ease with which all parents became involved. Clearly this activity focused on the child, engaged the parent or guardian in something where they felt comfortable, and was well organized by the teacher. Moreover, as one instructional teaching assistant in Kalskag pointed out, "In some classes, parents feel welcome. They are relaxed. The teachers have a handle on things. Parents are encouraged to get involved."

One teacher described how she helps parents feel welcome: "I have activities that bring the parents in; almost all the parents come and all the parents come to the parent-teacher conferences. I talk with the parents on the phone and I feel like I have a good relationship with all the parents." This teacher also indicated that she had visited about 50% of her students homes but felt more visits needed to be made.

An Aniak teacher during an interview was asked to rate her relationships with parents. She said that "seven years ago, I'd say it was about 2 or 3 [positive to positive/highly active]. Whereas now, it is close to 5 [five is off the positive scale]." When asked to describe what made the difference, she said,

> Like we said before, just parents who come to the system and feel more comfortable. In my first year as a teacher, during parent-teacher conferences, I didn't call any parents at all. I expected them to know when the conferences were and to show up. The second year I started calling every parent and letting them make a commitment to come to school. After doing that, I had more parents willing to come to school on their own. But then I still called every parent.

She goes on so reflect that, "if I was a parent and felt uncomfortable, I wouldn't want to come back." What appears especially striking about this teacher's comments is that they were echoed in the comments of a Native parent's sensitivity toward how children are treated by teachers: "Well, you know parents can sense the teachers that are interested in their children and are there to help their children." She goes on to describe a specific event that illustrates the desired sensitivity:

> You know my child has a hearing impairment, and I was so worried about him not being able to hear. I brought him to school and within a week this person had already, not even a week but a couple of days. She had him already assessed him, knew where he was supposed to be at, and worked on that. She knew where to stand in the room to . . . where he could hear her voice the best.

Throughout interviews and informal observations it was apparent that many teachers demonstrated interpersonal sensitivity to parents and to their children and it paid off in terms of good relationships. As will be discussed later students described teachers they valued characterizing most as caring and sensitive.

Local Control and External Influence

Prior to the Molly Hooch case (1974), youth, mostly Alaska Natives, were sent out of their villages to boarding schools where they were socialized into the Western educational system. Nearly everyone interviewed said the boarding school experience was hard on families and their children. However, some individuals who appeared to have flourished with boarding school education voiced concerns about local educational programs that are too "soft" on standards and incorporate too much Native culture and values into the school system.

This tension between forces external to the community and local culture and control have been a central theme throughout the collected data. Kalskag's isolation, coupled with the large number of Yup'ik Eskimo residents, has helped traditional Native culture play an important role in school life. Interestingly, the push for the integration of culture into the school curriculum came from teachers and was supported by the community and school district. State oil revenues were also an important factor since they provided an infusion of resources to support innovation.

In the last five years, reduced revenues have produced economic entrenchment, which can be seen in the curtailment of many programs viewed as a low priority to basic education by the district office and school board. For example, at the elementary school in Aniak, the science program has been reduced from a full-time science teacher to a program supported by a science specialist but taught by regular elementary teachers. In Kalskag, the band and counseling programs were initially cut and then restored. Another area that was mentioned often was the failure to update aging computer equipment. As one administrator pointed out, "at one time we were really up on computers, we had the newest computer, but because of funding cuts we are not on the upper end of that sort of thing." More recently, money has become available to buy new computers and connect to the Internet. There have also been cutbacks in travel outside the district for students. At one time, according to a teacher from Kalskag, "we used to take students to Juneau for a week to learn about state government, and that has been cut." A teacher from Aniak voiced a similar perception:

> They created the first-grade trip so they would take every first grader in the district to Anchorage for a week, and they would do a lot of cultural things like go to the museums, to the zoo, and they would take them out to a nice restaurant to eat so they could learn good manners and this type of thing. Well this is the first year in I don't know how many years that it has not been funded. And I'm not exactly sure why. That's one of the things that's changed as far as the funding goes. Things of that nature are not happening any more.

People interviewed in Kalskag felt they had no direct voice in decisions affecting the flow of resources to their school. Except for the school board, the community does not appear to have any direct voice in school decision making such as those found in reform efforts that incorporate site-based decision making. However, the district does have a variety of advisory strategies designed to hear the voice of the community and school staff.

The mandate to form PACs that emerged from the Molly Hooch case appears to be a mechanism designed to increase community voice in decision making, but PACs are only advisory. For example, it does not appear that PAC members participate in hiring of staff or have substantive involvement in curriculum. Some evidence suggests that a lack of experience and training may contribute to their lack of influence.

In many ways, the dominant model of schooling, one based on centralized power and control, has replicated itself in the Kuspuk School District, reinforcing the history of external control in village life. This history of external authority appears to have weakened the community voice, if not silenced it. However, it needs to be kept in mind that the political context of the Aniak and Kalskag schools is amazingly complex because the school is embedded within multiple layers of governance, outside influence, and history:

- Until recent hiring guidelines were put into place, most teachers were hired from outside the village by the central office and the school board.
- Kuskokwim Native Corporation, Kuskokwim Corporation, and Kuskokwim Economic Development Council have their offices in Aniak.
- There is a city council government and the traditional council.
- The school district is one of the largest employers, with teacher salaries being significantly above the local population.
- Historically there has been repression of Native culture and ways of knowing.
- State and federal educational mandates help define school policy.

- There has been an erosion and/or loss of a subsistence economy as a way of life.
- The community suffers from a high level of drug and alcohol abuse.
- Media such as the telephone, videos, and cable television have brought more of the outside world into village life and continue to influence local lifestyles in both positive and negative ways.
- Not being from the village makes you an outsider, especially in Kalskag where non-Natives cannot own land (non-Natives can own land in Aniak).
- There exists a tension between traditional knowledge or local ways of understanding and the need to become educated into the dominant society.
- The cost of travel, and distance between schools and the district office is high.

These layers of influence and their many interconnections help to remind us that there are no simple answers to the many questions that emerged during this study. One of the clearest illustrations of external influence comes from the state and federal system of mandates and grants. The intentions behind many of these influences are to serve the best interests of children, such as special education rulings that assure services are provided or mandates that require safety standards for children. But there are negative results as well, and some of these results can work against meaningful improvements in learning. For example, an area of concern that was often voiced during interviews by both teachers and administrators centers around the cyclical and often erratic nature of funding.

One illustration will help clarify this issue. During interviews and observations it became apparent that, at one time, there were efforts to implement portfolio assessment in the district. Evidently, teachers in one of the schools voiced an interest in learning more, and the curriculum coordinator for the district learned about another Alaska district's successful efforts to use portfolios. The district received grant money to provide training. As a result, portfolios were implemented in several of the elementary schools. When the study began about two years later, remnants of this initial work came up during interviews. The following vignette presents an interview exchange between two teachers and the case-study researcher. Teacher 1 was interviewed and that led to an interview with teacher 2:

Year 1 interview

Researcher: I understand that portfolios have been introduced in the district? What can you tell me about this improvement effort?

Teacher 1: Portfolios are something definitely that has been approached, and I would say that that is something that is going on.

Researcher: Is that district wide?

Teacher 1: District wide K–2, I believe is what it is, and then beyond that is recommended through 6th-grade. They ended up, from what I understand, training all the teachers in Aniak just because they were there. Most of the teachers that trained for it are no longer–well actually, right now they are here, but next year many will be gone.

Year 2 interview

Researcher: You were talking about the district takes on portfolios and they give some training. Um, and then report cards are due. Report cards become priority because the central office wants them. So, you send those in, and the end result is that the portfolio falls kind of into the background.

Teacher 1: Yeah, well, I would say that the portfolio has a tendency to fall into the background, especially when you get new people who have not been trained, I mean, for example, on our staff, even in the classrooms, none of us have been trained.

Researcher: I understand the district has had some interest in using portfolios. Please tell me what you know about this improvement effort?

Teacher 2: Yeah, I think it was a district decision, it was one of those trendy things where, you know, new standards for evaluation I think is a big thing coming up, especially in writing, and they ran into a portfolio that looked quite good from Juneau, and they jumped on it, and that's what they did. But from what I can tell, you know, we have a bunch of new staff and none of them were told what they should be doing with portfolios.

Researcher: I understand that you have been helping teachers set up portfolios?

Teacher 2: I'm doin' this on my own right now; there's no directives at all from the district, nobody said a thing. I'm just doin' it because I feel it's a very honorable way to not only learn about the kids that learn, but also share those findings with parents.

When district staff were interviewed about this interview exchange and its implications for the need for consistency and direction from the district office, the researcher was informed that there was no funding to continue the training because the original work was grant funded.

Further, the cost of bringing teachers together from the various village schools was prohibitive without outside funding. Interestingly, two and a half years later, portfolios have been reintroduced through a new grant. But this time, the district has hired a literacy coordinator from within the district to ensure staff development and follow-up will happen.

This story illustrates a kind of "boom and bust" pattern of program development. Coupled with teacher turnover and the continual new demands from outside the district, it becomes a continuous challenge for the district to provide a stable, consistent program. This pattern appears to be repeating itself with AOTE.

Clearly, the issues facing village education and reform are complex and reflect deeper issues that remain to be explored in another context.

The Integration of Native Culture and Knowledge into Schooling

The role of local knowledge in the context of schooling appears to be highly related to community involvement. Aniak schools provide classes in Yup'ik culture and language, which are required at the elementary level and an elective in the high school. However, the integration of Yup'ik culture and language into the curriculum of mainstream academic education is problematic on many fronts: Is it desired by local people? How can it be done in ways that do not violate cultural norms and values, especially by non-Native teachers? How can it be done while supporting learning goals that emphasize skills and competencies necessary for survival in the dominant culture? And how can it be done in a way that does not represent Yup'ik ways of knowing as fragmented and disconnected from the world? A Kalskag parent said she struggled with this tension often:

> Culture is important but reading, writing, and math and all that is going to be what they need in the future. There are things that we do at home that are still linked to our culture. We still do our subsistence: hunting and fishing and that type of stuff. . . . We still do a little bit of the skin sewing and stuff. . . .I really feel tossed and torn between which is more important.

In Aniak, the people interviewed seemed divided on the issue and maybe even leaned toward limiting culturally related curriculum to Yup'ik classes. Several reasons emerged from interview discussions. One board member suggested that the place for teaching Native culture and values was in the family and not in the school, any more than what is currently offered. This

sentiment also seemed to revolve around feelings that the purpose of schooling is for developing the skills necessary for competing in the dominant culture. This particular board member cited his own boarding school experiences that he felt gave him the skills to be a leader. He seemed to be saying, "They were tough experiences, but they made me who I am today."

In both villages, two related but implicit issues emerged from interviews with teaching staff. These can be stated as questions: What constitutes local culture? And who can successfully integrate local culture into schooling? One interviewee who, by all accounts, has been successful at integrating local culture into the school's curriculum suggests answers to both of these questions. One example from his work with students will illustrate how these issues can be successfully handled.

For years, the school has purchased the wood needed for shop classes from outside the village. Interestingly, the village sits in the midst of trees. The teacher thought that this did not make sense, so he worked with students to set up their own milling process to use local woods. Students therefore learned about the place where they live and about work and potential job opportunities. This same teacher described how he taught history using the local river and its importance in the life of the village as a starting point. From there, learning expanded out toward the larger context within which the river is embedded. Contrast this with the usual way history is taught, where students begin in a context well abstracted from where they live.

These examples reveal that an important element of local culture is place—in this case the rural setting of river and woods. Also, involving students in the culture of place does not necessarily constitute teaching about local Native culture. However, it reflects teaching within the context of Native culture: the place, the river, the habitat, and the habits of living locally. Moreover, this same teacher and several colleagues have been instrumental in bringing into the curriculum Native ways of knowing through the use of local resource people in such activities as a week-long camp "taught" by Native people and an Elder's Conference focusing on the knowledge of Native elders. These examples also suggest that the community voice is most likely to be heard when clear evidence exists that local place and customs are valued. Several observations made by parents and during interviews highlight local voices:

> We have a good program with Heritage Week where some of the men bring the boys hunting and trapping. The girls learn to sew and beadwork and skin; that is a good program, plus some of them are learning Eskimo dancing now and they are

> having their kids trying to start up a Native Olympic. . .Native games. Trying to build up their self esteem and spirit and help them. —Kalskag Parent

> When my mother was in school and they would slap her; she went to a boarding school and they would slap her face any time she spoke her language. She was there for I don't know how many years so she kind of forgot her language. My children have picked up the Yup'ik language and they understand words and they could speak it somewhat. I say that is a positive point. —Aniak Parent

Student Experiences

Students in grades 8 through 12 were convened in Aniak and Kalskag, and administered a survey entitled the *Quality of School Life* (QSL). QSL is a 27-item questionnaire designed to measure students' perceptions of their school environment. The total QSL score is a combination of three subscales: a) *Satisfaction with School* (sat), b) *Commitment to Classwork* (com), and c) *Reactions to Teachers* (tch).

The three subscales combine to create a total QSL score and may be considered an estimate of overall quality of school life from the students' point of view. In addition, at the end of the QSL there is a space for students to comment in their own words about the quality of life in school. The descriptive comments from students have been analyzed for patterns to better understand the numerical scores from the QSL.

Thinking positively about school, classwork, and teachers is important for students' general mental health and may enhance other school-related behaviors and learning. Thinking negatively about school may make students' day-to-day life in school unsatisfactory and act as a barrier to learning. In the long run, the perceived quality of school experiences may have a significant influence on student behavior and attitudes. Moreover, it was hoped that the QSL would provide insight into the types of learning opportunities and experiences that make a positive difference in students' lives.

QSL Results for Aniak

A total of 64 students (29 male and 35 female) completed the QSL, which represents over 95% of the students in grades 8–12. The average QSL score for all Aniak students was 14.05.

Scores range from a low of 1 to a high of 27 (the highest possible total QSL score). Average QSL scores by grade range from a low of 12.64 for the 9th-grade class to a high of 16.29 for the 12th-grade class. An analysis of the average total scores by grade reveals no statistically significant difference between grades. Interestingly, the student mean score of 14.05 was 1.06 points above the norming population (the norm mean score was 12.99).

The average subscale scores for each grade were 2.92 for Satisfaction with School (range 0–5), 5.03 for Commitment to Classwork (range 0–11), and 6.10 for Reactions to Teachers (range 0–11). Again, there were no statistically significant differences between subscales. However, statistically significant differences were found between male and female students. These differences and probabilities can be seen in Table 10.

Table 10
QSL Scores and Each Subscale by Gender in Aniak

	ave. QSL	ave. sat	ave. com	ave. tch
Female	12.41	2.68	4.59	5.15
Male	16.04	3.21	5.57	7.25
*p<	.01**	.194	.144	.001**

* the probability that the difference between the two scores was due to chance
** indicates when the probability was low enough to be considered statistically significant

Male students rate the overall quality of the school more positively (average QSL = 16.04) than female students (average QSL = 12.41). A one-way ANOVA ($F = 6.831$, $p < .01$) indicates that the difference between these two scores is much higher than expected by chance alone. This statistically significant difference shows up again in only one of the three subscales: Reactions to Teachers ($F = 12.36$, $p < .001$).

The student written comments were analyzed by organizing them into three categories (positive, negative, and neutral based on content) and then delineated by grade and gender. Again a difference is apparent between the male and the female students. A majority of the male students (65.5%) wrote comments that indicated they liked or felt positive about the school. Female students more often wrote comments that were neutral (45.7%). None of the male students wrote comments that were classified as negative, but 17.1% of the female students did. It should also be noted that a large group of the male students wrote no comments at all (13.8%)

while very few female students left the comment section blank (2.9%). Table 11 shows the results of the student comment analysis.

The aspects of school that the male students in Aniak feel positive about are preparation for the future, college, or careers (10); social (7); the fun, interest, and variety (4); the chance to "learn stuff" (4); fun teachers (2); and sports (1). For the female students who wrote positive comments about the school, the important aspects were: liking teachers (6); learning "wanting to be smart" (4); social (3); fun (3); preparation for job and future (2); and the ease (1). The female students who wrote negative comments mentioned: being bored (3); the teachers (2); having "nothing to look forward to" (2); the repetition (1); and feeling "lost" (1).

Table 11
Percentages Written Comments in Each Category by Grade and Gender for Aniak Students

grade	positive (like)	neutral	negative (dislike)	no comment
7	71.4	28.6	0	0
8	52.6	31.6	10.5	5.3
9	36.4	18.2	27.3	18.2
10	25.0	62.5	0	12.5
11	50.0	33.3	8.3	8.3
12	57.1	42.9	0	0
gender				
male	65.5	20.7	0	13.8
female	34.3	45.7	17.1	2.9

Finally, the average number of words written by each student in the comment section was recorded. In Aniak the female students wrote an average of 44.6 words while the male students wrote an average of 26 words. The averages are based on the students who did actually write something. If the students who left the comment section blank were included in the average it would be even lower for the male students, since more of them left the section blank.

Conclusion

Overall, students in Aniak indicate a high level of school quality. The scores and the comments do show some differences between the male and female students. The results of the statistical analysis on the Reaction to Teachers subscale and the corresponding lack of significant differences between male and female students on the other two subscales suggest that the difference in total QSL score may be largely due to the Reaction to Teachers difference. The comments seem to indicate that relationships with teachers are more important to the female students than to the male students. It should also be noted that the differences between the two other subscales (satisfaction & commitment), although not statistically significant, show a similar pattern. That is, male students in Aniak have consistently rated all aspects of the school measured by the QSL questionnaire more positively than female students.

More investigation is required to determine what specific factors in their relationships with teachers have produced this difference between the male and female students in Aniak.

QSL Results for Kalskag

Sixty-two students (34 male and 27 female) in Kalskag were administered the QSL questionnaire which represents over 95% of the students in grades 8–12. The average QSL score for all students in Kalskag was 14.40. Scores range from a low of 1 to a high of 27 (the highest possible total QSL score). Average QSL scores by grade ranged from a low of 10.00 for the 8th-grade class to a high of 18.38 for the 11th-grade class.

Analyses of the average scores did reveal statistically significant difference between the 8th-grade students and the 11th-grade students. For some reason the 11th-grade students rate their school experience much higher than average, while the 8th-graders rate their experience much lower than average. Moreover, the Reaction to Teachers (tch) subscale for both the 11th and 12th-grade students was significantly higher than it was for the 8th-grade students. The 10th and 7th-grade students also have high average tch scores but there are not enough of them for the difference to be significant.

There were no statistically significant differences between male and female students for the overall QSL scores or any subscale.

There was a mix of written comments regarding school in Kalskag. Most students expressed that they liked school in general but also shared various concerns. For example, there were some references to disliking teachers for being "boring" and not being as good as the previous teachers that were replaced. Also, both boys and girls mentioned that they would like more sports and activities at school such as girls' basketball and "open gym" after school. Other concerns included: "I think that we should be learning our culture along with the education we're getting now. Our culture includes language, crafts, and traditional ways etc. Some of us have stated this before, but nothing has been done about it."

The positive stance that was taken by many students focused on the environment of learning at the school. Examples include: "Ever since I moved here from Bethel, school has been much better for me. This school offers more opportunities to learn about the culture. I have noticed that the teachers here are like friends and all the people know each other. It's like one big happy family here except for the occasional argument here and there, but what family doesn't argue?" and "I feel this is the best school in Alaska! I like this school because of what's in it, three great teachers who watched me ever since I was in the 7th-grade. That tells me that either those teachers care about the students and like where they live. I also feel the confidence in myself that I can walk up to them about anything on my mind without them looking at me and laughing. This is why I think this is the best school around."

Further analysis of written comments show a very similar pattern between male and female students (Table 12). However, it is also clear that the 7th, 11th and 12th-grade students are more positive about their school experience than 8th, 9th and 10th-graders.

Gender differences are apparent for the Kalskag students when the average number of words written is considered. Male students who responded wrote an average of 36 words while female students wrote an average of 58. Again the percentage of male students who wrote nothing at all (23.5) was much higher than the percentage of female students who wrote nothing (7.1).

Table 12
Percentage in Each Category by Grade and Gender for Kalskag Student Comments

grade	positive (like)	Neutral	negative (dislike)	no comment
7	70.0	20.0	10.0	0
8	23.5	41.2	17.6	17.6
9	42.9	14.3	14.3	28.6
10	37.5	25.0	0	37.5
11	62.5	12.5	0	25.0
12	75.0	16.7	8.3	0
gender				
male	47.1	23.5	5.9	23.5
female	53.6	25.0	14.3	7.1

Conclusion

Students in Kalskag report a high satisfaction with school. Other than a difference among written comments and a greater tendency for male students not to write at all, there are few grade differences in satisfaction with school. The most striking finding is the significantly lower satisfaction with school reported by the 8th-grade class when compared to other grade levels. To some extent the 9th-grade class shows a similar pattern of overall dissatisfaction with the school.

The differences between the 8th-grade class and the others are particularly striking in their rating of both their instructional and personal interactions with their teachers. The overall lower QSL scores of the 8th-grade class indicate low general satisfaction or well-being in school, low commitment to the work offered, and negative reactions to their teachers. The fact that the 9th-grade class demonstrates a similar pattern of total scale and subscale scores may be due to a shared experience with the 8th-grade class or feelings remaining from their experiences a year ago as 8th-graders. However, with data from only one year it is difficult to say whether this will be a continuing problem for each 8th-grade class, or whether it is relevant only to the experiences of this particular group of 8th-grade students. In either case, a closer look at the experiences of the 8th and 9th-grade classes is highly recommended.

Some Cautionary Comments About Using and Interpreting the QSL

QSL is only an estimate of students' reactions to school. Individual scores may be influenced by conditions or events occurring before the survey was administered. Unusual or unexpected responses may be better understood or clarified with written comments, re-test, observational data, or other measures.

QSL may be more descriptive of the student groups than of the school in general.

Previous research has found that QSL scores tend to decrease from year to year. A high score in 12th-grade may average more than a high score in 7th-grade. And a low score in 7th-grade or 8th-grade may be more cause for concern than a low score in 12th.

Finally, using the QSL on a pre-post test basis may provide useful comparison data, especially if some intervention with students is being used because of assessment results.

Focus Group Interviews

Focus group interviews were held with seniors from Aniak and Kalskag high schools. These students represent a cumulative history of schooling in their respective villages and therefore can provide unique insights into the perceived opportunities and quality of learning they have experienced. They can also provide understanding about how they perceive that their schooling has influenced their options after they graduate. Five general questions were used to guide the focus interviews (Table 13). Students wrote down their responses and then shared and discussed them with the researcher and one another.

Results for Aniak

What is liked most about living in Aniak? Students in Aniak like the small town attitude, closeness of friends and family, and accessibility of wildlife. One student summarized this as the "family environment" of the village.

When asked, "What do you think we should be preparing you for?" one student responded, "It has been said many times by the staff and administration that high school is to prepare you for the outside would. I agree that this is the proper role of high school, but it should go beyond just that. It should give you a positive outlook on life and encourage you to follow your own hopes, dreams, and ideas." Even though most students cited preparation for the

"outside world" or college as important, one student said, "I think they should put more emphasis on local things like the land and what's going on with it because most people will not leave rural Alaska."

Table 13
Student Focus Group Interview Questions

1. What do you like most about living in your village?
2. What do you think school should be preparing you for?
3. What are your plans for after you graduate?
4. What qualities make a good teacher?
5. What academic experiences have helped you learn the most?

Of interest were two comments that may be hinting at some frustration with the school's rules and regulations: a) "The school is my resource for learning. Schools should teach people how to learn and be free thinkers not hold them back with regulations." b) "I feel Aniak High is providing a basic education to go forward with your life and sending young adults into a world where they can be prepared and not ignorant of outside ways. Which is exactly what they try to do here but with a lot of rules."

When asked what academic experiences have helped them the most, students overwhelmingly cited hands-on or other visual experience with information. Also, teachers that are interactive and fun with a sense of humor were important to students.

Results for Kalskag

When students were asked what they liked most about living in Kalskag, the majority of students referred to the scenery and wilderness of the region. For example, one student remarked, "The view from the mountains is awesome. Also, the animals are like the ones in the zoo but in the wild state." But along with this were a few comments of students that stated they only liked Kalskag "when there is something to do."

When asked what they thought school should be preparing them for, there seemed to be a general feeling that school should be preparing them for life outside of the village, such as college

or the military. Other students stated that they should be prepared to get a job, with one student specifically stating, "This school should be preparing us for the jobs that are ahead of us here in this village, jobs like carpentry, welding, and machinery." These responses corresponded with the answers to the question, "What are your plans for the future? Where will you be next year?" Almost all of the students said they plan on going to college or joining the military. Only one student said they planned on staying in Kalskag.

What qualities make a good teacher? Students want a teacher who can relate to them and communicate material in a fun and unique way.

Conclusion

Overall, there are a wide variety of opinions of school and life in rural Alaska among students in the Kalskag and Aniak schools. Students in both villages enjoy the small town feeling and access to the wilderness they have in their villages and pointed out that there are fewer problems with crime, gang violence, and pollution in their villages than in larger communities. Many students praised their school for these very same reasons, especially in Kalskag. The feeling of their school being like a family, the closeness of teachers to students, and the social aspect with friends at school stood out as primary reasons for students liking their schools. However, girls in Aniak did not feel the close, positive relations that boys seemed to feel.

Of concern are the comments about school not being challenging enough for students. It is probably to be expected that some students of this age group would label school as "boring." However, with these comments were other more specific comments pointing to school work not being challenging enough for students. Since most students reported that they thought schools should be preparing them for college or other activities in the "outside world" and also reported that they plan to go to college or the military after graduation, it is crucial for these schools to address these concerns further. It is also important to note that some students voiced their concern that schools should focus on local issues and needs to prepare those students who will not leave rural Alaska.

Conclusions and Implications

Because the Kuspuk School District was in the early stages of AOTE implementation when this study began, efforts were made to look at contextual variables that appear to help or hinder program implementation. In other words, what conditions need to be in place in order for a systemic reform effort such as AOTE to produce positive outcomes for students? And second, how could AOTE be modified to better help villages make a real impact on student learning?

The Importance of Context

AOTE represented an opportunity for the Kuspuk School District, specifically the villages of Aniak and Kalskag, to help transform the role community, parents, students, and staff have played in improving learning for students. Historically, the school district has operated with top-down management style that appears to contribute to relational conflicts both within the school system and between the schools and the community. But problems were also exacerbated by the attitudes and behaviors of teachers caught up in contract negotiations and their resultant conflicts. However, even without this history of conflict over management style, teacher rights, and issues of control, there appear to be deeper historical issues relating to a discontinuity in cultural values brought about by the traditional Western values that are implicit in the structure and operation of schools. Ultimately, these issues center around what the purpose of schooling is for Alaska Native villages and who gets to define not only the purpose, but how that purpose is operationalized into learning for youth.

Clearly, there are many voices helping to define education. There are federal and state policy mandates, funding formulas, and guidelines and initiatives almost too numerous to count, with new ones being initiated almost daily. There are administrative associations, groups for school directors, and teachers' unions all clamoring to be heard, all struggling to protect their interests. Almost the last voices heard are those of the community, especially students and their parents. Ironically, many of the policy mandates have been put in place in the name of protecting the rights and interests of students and parents. As a result, communities often find themselves on the defensive in terms of being told what is best for their children: not only what they learn, but how they should learn it. This often leads to a devaluing local knowledge. In

many cases, especially where experiences with schooling have not been very positive, only the hardiest of individuals continue to assert their rights to be heard.

Throughout the interviews with the diverse members of the communities and schools, evidence abounded for the need to focus effort on healing past wounds and building stronger relationships across the diverse elements of the community. Progress in the short term appears to have been made as demonstrated by the efforts of AOTE, improved hiring practices, the implementation of a comprehensive literacy program, and the continued support of cultural curriculum opportunities such as Heritage Week, instruction in the Yup'ik language, and the Elder's Conference. But taken from a long-term perspective, these efforts seem piecemeal and episodic.

For the most part, they seem to reflect the nature of funding with its grants and cyclical ups and downs, but also conflicts in cultural values and the logistics of providing quality education in remote village schools. Interestingly, given what might appear to be insurmountable challenges, it was found that people cared about their children and their community and worked hard. Every teacher interviewed wanted to make a difference in the lives of students. Every parent interviewed wanted the best for their child. And every administrator and board member interviewed voiced strong concerns for the well-being of students.

From an outsider perspective, educational reform efforts that have come and gone in Aniak and Kalskag (and maybe the school district in general) do not appear to come and go because of a lack of concern or desire for positive outcomes for children. They appear to be short lived because they disregard and in some cases dismiss local context. AOTE represents a case in point.

Rather than learning how things worked at the local level, AOTE provided process and activities that implicitly said, "Do things this way and use these activities and you will discover what you need to do." Unfortunately, as nearly everyone involved with AOTE observed, the process got in the way of participant voice. The clearest result of this can be seen in the similar pattern of declining attendance at all the AOTE village meetings.

At the first meetings, attendance was viewed as very good and lots of different people shared their ideas. But as meetings continued, fewer and fewer community members showed up. In part, village life is very busy and going to a meeting must justify the time taken from something else. People were not seeing tangible results in the short term and were feeling

nothing was going to happen, or worse yet, the process was seen as a form of district manipulation. In other words, according to one village resident, "the school board was going to work on the goals they wanted, not what we wanted. We were just going through this process so the school district could get what it wants."

In the short term, AOTE has not been a failure. People are thinking and talking about reform issues and community needs in new ways. Awareness and discussion of important concerns have increased. But what changes for students and the community over the long term is an important issue in systemic reform and will depend on contextual conditions that have a likelihood of sustaining diverse community involvement. A number of conditions emerged from this case study as being key for sustained success:

- Help support and develop quality relations by focusing on building and sustaining caring, positive relationships with youth, parents, and community members. Many wonderful examples exist currently in the villages and need to be observed and understood, especially by new teachers just coming into the district.
- Understand how local knowledge and place can be used to provide a meaningful learning context for students. Many examples exist in both Aniak and Kalskag that could serve as exemplars for curriculum work and staff development.
- Ensure consistent, personal involvement in villages by someone representing district and state-level programs so that local context is understood and considered in educational decisions. This involvement needs to be perceived in the village as an advocacy role for the local place.
- Ensure that multiple voices and viewpoints at all levels of the reform program have meaningful input. In villages, strategies that have worked outside Alaska such as surveys and large meetings are unlikely to be effective. Face-to-face, informal approaches have the best hope of success.

Within the context of these four conditions, how could AOTE be improved to better address the needs of educational reform in remote villages such as Aniak and Kalskag? Conceptually, the many-leveled structure of the AOTE process seems appropriate for implementing reform. For example, AOTE initially works with a district-wide leadership team that is formed to oversee implementation at the district level. Village residents are identified to serve as local facilitators. This includes the identification and training of a village leadership

team. Then a research team is formed to monitor progress and provide feedback for adjusting the process.

These structures are designed to give voice at the local level and ensure that communication and adjustment to the implementation are ongoing. However, most people involved in these levels are volunteers or have other roles within the district. This tends to overstress participants and create a feeling of another district add-on to existing work. For example, it takes nearly a year of ongoing training for the process to become operational, if it is successful. In villages such as Aniak and Kalskag, where people spend a large portion of their time involved in meeting subsistence needs, time given to reform activities must yield immediate and valued results to hold interest. In other word, available time is a highly prized and competitive resource and any effort to use that time must clearly be seen as beneficial. Much up-front work needs to be done in order to create buy-in and ownership.

Given this issue, AOTE might be improved if it began with a core group of motivated individuals from each village who spend time identifying key community networks and individuals who can positively influence the community and school. They would engage these folks in a dialogue about the school and community in terms of their work. In other words, learn what they do, discover their interests and desires, and engage them in their ideas for supporting and helping youth. This focus is aimed at building relationships and the common ground upon which to make improvement decisions.

Classroom-level examples of the kind of communications necessary for engaging and sustaining such relationships were discovered during interviews with teachers and parents. The common pattern across these examples reflects teachers going out of their routine roles to interact with parents and community members in ways that demonstrate genuine care for students and an understanding of local context and place. In some cases it was persistent phone and face-to-face contacts in and out of the school. In other cases it was using local resources and people to contextualize learning. Moreover, the examples found in both Aniak and Kalskag of these types of relationship-building behaviors occurred with young teachers, senior teachers, new teachers, Native teachers, and non-Native teachers. These examples have much to teach about how reform and improvement can occur in village life. Moreover, such a focus builds on local assets and resources as opposed to building on problems and needs.

The training of trainers model used by AOTE in Aniak and Kalskag (i.e., training facilitators to train village leadership teams) sought to use local people as a conduit to build the desired relationships within the villages. But AOTE staff did not seem to understand the complexity of the facilitator's role in building a village support base for the reform process. It might have been better to have worked directly with the entire village team to ensure common understanding and broaden the base of decision makers. Moreover, if the leadership team represented individuals drawn from key networks within the village, the process would have created more opportunity to penetrate into the fabric of village life.

Lastly, successful reform efforts need to be given priority status and remain visible throughout the school and community. People need to know about its purposes, believe it will help their children, and see people of social and political power as advocates. But when it is viewed as another program, added onto an already full plate of activities, then the probability of success will be severely diminished.

If one were to try to predict the outcomes for the AOTE process in Aniak and Kalskag, one would not be optimistic. New district priorities have been established such as literacy that add to the mix of improvement efforts. The history of AOTE to date suggests that only Kalskag has a continued focus on the process, but in a modified manner that reflects local realities. In addition, the district office has provided support to Kalskag in terms of help in mapping local assets, and they have come around to supporting the original goal of addressing drug and alcohol abuse in the village. If there is a continuation of support for these local efforts, especially in ways that protect local time and decisions from the encroachment of new district program demands, then positive outcomes for youth and the village will occur.